(1947-48)

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"While the chiefs have final decision, there is nothing to prevent any individual from requesting or suggesting a new ruling, or even setting up by some unconventional act a situation which may require one. Again I have one possible example, but no trustworthy evidence as to how novel this situation may have been, beyond the fact that it was unique in our brief experience. As in a good deal of the available evidence about the process of government, our presence was indirectly involved. We were a considerable irritant to the body politic.

Tom was assigned by the chiefs to devote his full time to working for us as interpreter. The activities to which he would have ordinarily devoted this time--helping to feed his household, working on his new canoe--were to be taken over by others. On October 15, Tom went on strike. He announced that he would not work for us that day or the next, but would work on his canoe. His reason was not any objection to us or our tratment of him, but the fact that nobody had been working on his canoe for days. If he had to spend all his time with us, he said, his canoe never would be finished.

Conceivably this was the first strike on Ifalik, although, as already said, there is no evidence as to this. What is certain is that it was the only example in our experience of open defiance of the orders of the chiefs. Tom went so far as to criticize the chiefs for not issuing orders to men to work on the canoe--or not issuing them often enough to keep the men on the job. He showed [142] not only a short temper, as compared with the mildness usual on Ifalik, but also considerable courage.

The response of the chiefs was not to issue a command or decree. Nor did they punish Tom for his temerity. Following the general rule of courtesy, they were quite conciliatory. They reasoned with Tom, and persuaded him to reduce his abstention from work for us to one day. The two junior chiefs, WolpaitIk and Toromann, themselves helped him work on the canoe that day, and several younger men appeared. The work seemed to go somewhat better from then on. In other words, Tom won his strike. But it cost him a good deal of emotional stress. About noon on his day of strike, Spiro found him much disgruntled. Not only had the chiefs disapproved of his conduct, however gently; his wife had scolded him, apparently more emphatically, for deserting us. 'Too much talk', Tom said.

The chiefs' mild policy worked well. The strike was limited to one day, and--what was of great importance on Ifalik--there were no hard feelings. By implication, the chiefs had promulgated a rule of conduct, whether or not it was a new one. They had acknowledged the 'right to strike'."